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## Opera in the United-States

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### ***DEVELOPMENT OF OPERA IN AMERICA***

When Giacomo Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* premiered at The Metropolitan Opera in 1910, its version of America was a rough landscape of temporary structures: culture was limited to Bible verses and remembered songs from the old country, accompanied by a miner's guitar.

America was indeed a young country with a young tradition of classical music. It would be more than half a century before a permanent opera company graced most major cities. However, opera was hardly unknown. In New Orleans, the first Théâtre d'Orléans opened in October 1815, presenting popular works by Boieldieu, Spontini, Auber and other French composers. Under impresario John Davis, New Orleans saw over 700 performances of about 150 operas. His mission was showing off French opera, "the pride and hope of the generation raised on the ruins of the old French regime." This mission took him all over the country, playing to enthusiastic French emigres in Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Boston. The English actor James Henry Caldwell opened the rival Camp Street Theatre in 1824, followed by the St. Charles Theatre—the largest and grandest in America at the time—in 1835.

Traveling troupes—some led by Americans, others imported from the operatic motherland—entertained settlers in the rapidly growing cities from coast to coast. Particularly noteworthy was the debut of Manuel Garcia's company—headlined by his daughter, Maria Malibran—in 1825. Encouraged by his friend Lorenzo Da Ponte, himself a recent immigrant to the new world, Garcia created a sensation by giving New York audiences their first performances in Italian.

In 1880, fifty-two of New York's leading citizens subscribed \$100,000 each to what was to become the Metropolitan Opera. The new company presented *Faust* in 1883 and began taking its productions on the road just months after that inaugural performance; by the turn of the century, the Met had played more than 30 cities, from Nashville, Tennessee, to Los Angeles, California.

While the Met is the oldest and most prominent company in the country today, it was at the time only one of many operatic ventures in New York. In addition to numerous itinerant troupes, the city was home to the Astor Place Opera House (1847-1852), the Academy of Music (1854-1886) and Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company (1906-1910). As with similar ventures across the country, the shareholder-based system ultimately proved unsustainable, even for the Met; the grande dame of the American opera scene reorganized as the nonprofit Metropolitan Opera Association in 1940, and the Metropolitan Opera Guild, founded in 1935, became an important source of support.

Although many American cities did not have resident opera companies in the first decades of the twentieth century, they did not lack for opera houses. In communities from Northampton, Massachusetts to Dubuque, Iowa, civic pride demanded a theater, and that building was usually christened the "opera house." In addition to playing host to touring opera troupes, these venues hosted everything from vaudeville to town meetings.

As urban centers began to mature, attempts were made to install permanent opera companies; however, only a handful of those pioneering companies survive. San Francisco Opera (est. 1923), much like the Metropolitan Opera, presented opera on a grand scale, first to "home" audiences in a major American city, then touring. Chautauqua Opera (1920) and Central City Opera (1932) presented an alternative model, offering a respite from city life with summer festival seasons.

The real boom in American opera came after the second World War. Just as settlers rallied around the construction of opera houses decades earlier, so did groups of concerned citizens work diligently toward the establishment of permanent opera companies. The Jackson Opera Guild, later to become Mississippi Opera, was incorporated in 1947 to promote and encourage the enjoyment, study and appreciation of opera; to help in the development of operatic talent; and to provide cultural enrichment for the public through operatic performances. Likewise, the Tulsa Opera Club (est. 1948) paved the way for the fully-professional Tulsa Opera. By 1960, nearly 40 of today's opera companies had been established by passionate citizens, spanning the country from Wilmington, Delaware to Honolulu, Hawaii.

Even as American opera companies have grown beyond their humble beginnings and acquired professional staff, they remain reliant on the support of committed volunteers, from the community leaders who serve as trustees to guild members who assist with tasks ranging from fundraising to landscaping. The tradition of volunteerism not only allows an opera company to operate more cost-effectively, it strengthens the company's ties to the community, person by person.

## **THE AMERICAN OPERA LANDSCAPE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Today, more than a century after the founding of the Metropolitan Opera, every state in the country boasts at least one opera company. OPERA America, the national service organization for opera, counts well over one hundred professional company members, plus a number of smaller opera producers and presenters. Over half of these companies were established after 1970, with one quarter of the total established since 1980.

Those who built opera companies—along with those who built symphony orchestras, museums, and theaters—appealed to civic pride as they sought support from community leaders. Their conviction that important cities are populated by thriving arts organizations have become ingrained in our national consciousness. In 2002, the Performing Arts Research Coalition commissioned a multi-disciplinary, three-year study in ten communities across the country and found that arts attenders and non-attenders alike believe that the arts improve the quality of life, are a source of community pride, promote understanding of other people and different ways of life, help preserve and share cultural heritage, and contribute to the education of children. In *Deepening Opera Attendance*, a study commissioned by OPERA America, one respondent remarked, “I am convinced that whatever arts a community has to offer contribute to the betterment of the community. I think they are great selling points when the city fathers are trying to lure new industry to the area.”

American opera companies—indeed, all American cultural institutions—depend on the continuing engagement of community stakeholders. Government support for the arts is minimal, and in the absence of funding from a central taxing authority, opera companies must instead rely on people’s willingness to tax themselves by making contributions to the organizations they value. Successful opera companies understand that theirs is a culture of relationship, in which the company reflects the values of the local community while, at the same time, offering a product that enhances the quality of life. Thus, American opera companies are as varied as the communities they call home, as will be seen in the four companies described below.

### ***Chicago: the Lyric Opera***

Lyric Opera of Chicago is among the largest companies in the country today, presenting eight productions annually in a modified repertory format. Chicago has a storied operatic history going back to the mid-nineteenth century. Like other major urban areas, it saw not only traffic from touring companies, but also several attempts to establish a permanent company. Crosby’s Opera House, with 3,000 seats, opened its doors in 1865; the even larger Chicago Auditorium opened in 1889. In 1910, The Chicago Grand Opera Company appeared on the scene, having inherited the properties of Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera Company almost intact. The new company boasted significant star power, with Mary Garden featured as prima donna for for twenty-one seasons. Other companies, including the Chicago Civic Opera, Ravinia Opera, Chicago City Opera

Company, and Chicago Opera Company followed. However, by 1947 all efforts to produce opera locally had stalled; as in the nineteenth century, the company relied on touring companies.

In 1954, Carol Fox, Lawrence V. Kelly and Nicola Rescigno founded the Lyric Theatre, later renamed Lyric Opera of Chicago. The company attracted attention early on by presenting the American debut of Maria Callas on opening night. The young company continued to make a point of presenting the stars of the operatic firmament. A parade of European stars, together with an emphasis on the Italian repertory, earned the company the nickname “La Scala West.”

In 1989, under the leadership Ardis Krainik, Lyric Opera of Chicago launched *Toward the 21st Century*, an initiative to produce one twentieth-century European and one American opera each season as part of the regular series. Over the next decade, as part of this initiative, the company commissioned three new works: *McTeague* (William Bolcom), *Amistad* (Anthony Davis), and *A View from the Bridge* (William Bolcom).

Today, the key opera company in the “city of big shoulders” continues to make its name with lavish productions featuring star singers; at the same time, it continues to make American opera integral in its long-range programming. The company is also characterized by a particular emphasis on fiscal responsibility. As General Director William Mason declared before an audience of his peers at OPERA America’s 2004 conference, “I’m not running an opera, I’m running a fifty million dollar business.”

### ***Houston: the Houston Grand Opera***

Residents of Houston, Texas saw their first opera in 1867. By the late nineteenth century, the city boasted three opera houses, although they were not primarily concerned with presenting opera. The City Auditorium, which opened in 1910, served as the primary venue for opera for more than half a century, hosting companies from Chicago and Boston, as well as some homegrown efforts. But the Houston Grand Opera, today one of the ten largest companies in the country, did not present its first season until 1956.

When the 29-year-old David Gockley took over Houston Grand Opera in 1972, the city was experiencing a boom; during that decade, Shell Oil Company relocated its corporate headquarters to Houston, joining 200 other major firms that moved headquarters, subsidiaries and divisions to the city. Under Gockley’s leadership, the company established a national reputation worthy of the new business center where it made its home, focusing on innovation while eschewing elitism. “I think we are particularly American landscape, here in Houston,” said Gockley. “When I came on the scene, a lot of companies were run by immigrants. It was natural, as the American generation took over these companies, for the shift to happen.” In just over three decades, the company presented thirty-five world premieres by composers including John Adams, Leonard Bernstein, Carlisle Floyd, Jake Heggie and Meredith Monk.

Houston Grand Opera has also become synonymous with bold audience-development initiatives. During the 1970s and 80s, Texas Opera Theatre brought opera to small towns across the country, logging performances in forty states—from Maine to Wyoming. In the late 1990s, the Multimedia Modular Stage harnessed new technology for free outdoor performances of *Carmen* that had more in common with a rock show than with a proscenium stage presentation. Under Anthony Freud, who assumed leadership of the company in 2006, the company launched HGOco, which is not only not only a continuation of the company's commitment to creating new work for the stage, but also a new effort to establish Houston Grand Opera as a vital cultural resource for the people of Houston.

### ***Santa Fe: the Santa Fe Opera Festival***

“No artistic venture of this sort can ever make money,” said John Crosby, the founding general director of Santa Fe Opera, as he began the drive to create the company. <sup>i</sup>“What counts is what it gives a community and a country.” Crosby, a young conductor from New York, hoped to create a true repertory company, in which talented young American singers would have an opportunity to gain experience in productions that gave equal attention to dramatic and musical values. <sup>ii</sup> Crosby also placed emphasis on expanding the repertory; during his more than 40-year tenure, the company staged numerous American premieres, including six works by Hans Werner Henze and six lesser-known operas by Richard Strauss. Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* was presented in the company's first season under the watchful eye of the composer himself, who returned to Santa Fe for many subsequent summers. <sup>iii</sup>

In addition to offering compelling productions of an art form that had its roots in the old world, Santa Fe Opera also created an experience distinctly of its place, a place where the magnificent painted sky has served as backdrop to many unforgettable productions. When the company's second opera house opened in 1965, the usher corps wore brilliantly colored wool ponchos hand-woven by local artisans. <sup>iv</sup>

Indeed, the high concentration of local artists and artisans made Santa Fe an attractive destination long before the founding of Santa Fe Opera. The arrival of a permanent opera company made a strong statement about the intellectual and cultural aspirations of its citizenry. The leaders of Santa Fe Opera recognized the need to galvanize the local community around the new venture, immediately establishing opera guilds in Los Alamos, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Roswell, and Las Vegas, New Mexico. <sup>v</sup> These tireless volunteers provided invaluable operational support and fundraising assistance. The Santa Fe Opera was followed by a wave of new cultural organizations, including the fine arts campus of St. John's College (1964), the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival (1972), and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum (1997). As the city's cultural resources grew, so did its population, which more than doubled in the second half of the twentieth century.

Crosby's distinctive vision drew opera aficionados from all over the world. While not the first seasonal opera festival, Santa Fe in many ways created a model for the companies that followed. A program for emerging singers, established with the approval from the American Guild of Musical Artists in the company's first season, provides an opportunity

for young artists to cut their teeth on the stage.<sup>vi</sup> An emphasis on unusual repertory in fresh productions piques the interest of operagoers whose local companies offer a more predictable menu. Finally, Santa Fe itself offers a respite from urban life and seasonal extremes. Such an approach has been replicated, with great success, in locations ranging from Cooperstown, New York to Sarasota, Florida.

While works by American composers make frequent appearances in Santa Fe, the company is particularly distinguished by its staunch commitment to bringing important contemporary European operas before American audiences. Recent seasons have seen the world premiere of *The Letter* (2009), by American composer Paul Moravec, as well as American premieres of works by Thomas Adès, Tan Dun, and Kaija Saariaho. Richard Gaddes, who founded Opera Theatre of Saint Louis prior to succeeding Crosby in Santa Fe, said, “John Crosby used to say that festivals should be pilgrimages. Few people are going to make the trip to Santa Fe just to see another *Carmen*... The box-office strength of a *La bohème* or *La traviata*, of course, allows us to present a *Madame Mao* or *Ainadamar*. Audiences have a learning curve, and the old and familiar help finance the new and different.”

### ***St. Louis: the Saint Louis Opera Theatre***

Like Santa Fe, Saint Louis is now home to an adventurous summer festival. The prosperous town on the banks of the Mississippi River saw its first opera in the 1830s; the Metropolitan Opera made the first of many visits in 1884. In 1889, the German Grand Opera Company presented the city with its first Ring Cycle. Saint Louis is home to the country’s second-oldest symphony orchestra, and was the first in the U.S. to have a municipally-funded art museum. However, apart from the Municipal Opera Association, which presented lighter works in outdoor performances, the city was without an opera company of its own until 1976.

One of the hallmarks of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis is its intimacy: all productions take place on the thrust stage of the Loretto-Hilton Center, which seats fewer than 1,000 people. Like Santa Fe, the company presents ambitious repertory in theatrically-compelling productions. Like other summer festivals, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis draws audiences, in part, by offering unusual repertory; as of 2009, the company will have presented 21 world premieres and 22 American premieres.

A sense of community pervades the entire Opera Theatre experience; company leaders place great value on ongoing relationships with both patrons and audience members. While city of Saint Louis is more cosmopolitan than other festival sites, it creates a summer retreat atmosphere by virtue of its famous gardens and gracious hospitality. An evening at the opera typically begins with a picnic dinner and ends with an opportunity for patrons and artists to mingle over refreshments.

### **A CULTURE OF RELATIONSHIP**

For opera companies across America, a culture of relationship is fundamental to the bond with subscribers, donors and single ticket buyers. These relationships are based, in part, on the opera lover's passion for a particular repertory and style of presentation. This does not mean that opera leaders pander to popular taste, but that they remain connected to the audience and foster a sense of trust in their artistic vision. In times of economic crisis, this passion and these relationships are essential and serve to insulate the company from government cuts and reductions in corporate or foundation sponsorships.

Opera companies can be found in communities of every size across the United States. Each company—from the largest to the smallest—plays a vital role in the national opera ecology. The smaller companies offer early professional experience for emerging performers and creative artists; they also provide an easy way for community members to become involved in the life of an opera company.

A company's contract with its patrons extends beyond the stage. Most American companies offer a free introductory-talk, led by a member of the artistic staff, prior to curtain. At Seattle Opera, General Director Speight Jenkins leads a free-wheeling post-show discussion with audience members. Companies often provide a dining option that is in keeping with their personality; At Lyric Opera of Chicago, a luxurious restaurant attached to the opera house offers fine dining before the opera, with a dessert course served at intermission. In Central City, Colorado, the opera company, which owns and maintains a number of historic properties in addition to the theater, hosts dinners in the 1872 Teller House, once said to be the finest hotel west of the Mississippi. In Santa Fe, the parking lot opens three hours before curtain time for patrons who enjoy "tailgating" against a backdrop of a spectacular sunset.

Community residents who do not regularly attend opera may encounter their local company more casually: they may enjoy free concerts in a local park, or perhaps enroll their children in extracurricular activities offered by the company's education department. An opera company's primary mission may be the production of excellent opera in for its community, but most companies have a short mainstage season that is seen by a relatively small proportion of the population. Lyric Opera of Chicago, one of the largest companies in the country, presents 79 performances a year. The season at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis lasts only six weeks.

In cities across the country, opera companies continue to expand their activities beyond the mainstage season in order to foster a strong relationship with the community at large. Opera managers must devote considerable time and resources to a year-round portfolio of cultural and educational services for the public. Such service has proven to build audiences and earn broader appreciation for the work of the opera company among attenders and non-attenders, as well as funders and government officials.

Opera companies' emphasis on education may stem from an eagerness to overcome the negative stereotypes about opera. Indeed, in the United States almost every opera is performed in a language that is foreign to the audience. Education programs offer a

spectrum of activities. Students can learn about opera at dress rehearsals and through school-based performance programs. Many school districts have developed long-term partnerships with opera companies through which opera is central to arts education and to the integration of the arts with other core subjects.

Opera educators have developed a number of curricula that introduce children to the masterpieces of the literature at the same time that they are coached through the composition and performance of an original opera. *Music!Words!Opera!*, one of the first such curricula, was developed by OPERA America and is in use by opera companies across the country. Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, which has been using the curriculum since 1990, now works with thirty elementary and secondary schools.

Increasingly, opera educators are turning their attention to life-long learning. The expansion of the audience is evidenced by the fact that many companies now have “audience development” or “community engagement” departments, rather than “education” departments. In a 2008 survey of fifty-one American opera companies, adults accounted for thirty-seven percent of the audiences served by these programs.

### **PROGRAMMING**

Most American opera companies do not have a permanent performance space; instead, they lease a facility that may also be used by the local symphony, ballet, touring groups and others. Unlike European companies that create a diverse menu of offerings in order to keep a hall full for as many nights as possible, American opera companies tend to focus on opera, typically offering two to five different titles each year. (Only three companies mount more than ten productions in a given season.) Except for the largest companies and those with festival seasons, the companies tend to present opera in a stagione format, offering only one production at a time. This allows companies to employ a smaller production staff than those companies that must rotate productions on and off the stage on a daily basis.

Such limited seasons put tremendous pressure on company leaders to make every production count. Gone are the days when opera companies could ensure box office success by assembling a roster of star artists. Stars are—almost by definition—very few in number, and the explosion of opera in the United States means that company leaders must seek new ways to create value for their communities. Neither is repertory alone a determining factor in selling tickets. In any case, audience reaction to particular titles is becoming increasingly difficult to predict; some companies report that audiences are experiencing “*Bohème* fatigue” and turn out in greater numbers for unusual works.

For the typical company, a four-opera season might include three familiar titles and one more adventurous selection. However, some companies have developed a patron base that expects and even demands unusual fare. Festival companies, which rely on cultural tourism, strive to serve up a menu not replicated elsewhere. Many major urban centers, including New York, Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles, have seen the emergence of additional local opera providers in recent years. These smaller companies are most successful when they offer seasons that complement the offerings of the larger,



established company; Chicago Opera Theater, for instance, emphasizes works written before 1785 and after 1925. In a very few cases, a community's primary opera company has created a climate in which more adventurous programming is successful; for example, over the past 10 seasons the majority of operas produced by the mid-sized Minnesota Opera have fallen outside the "top 20."

OPERA America has published a list of the 10 most-produced operas for the last 20 years, and that list is remarkably consistent—in 20 years, just 26 works have made the top 10: *Aida*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *The Barber of Seville*, *La Bohème*, *Carmen*, *La Cenerentola*, *Così fan tutte*, *Don Pasquale*, *The Elixir of Love*, *Faust*, *Die Fledermaus*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Madama Butterfly*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Mikado*, *Pagliacci*, *Rigoletto*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Tosca*, *La Traviata*, and *Turandot*.

In 2006, OPERA America looked at the programming repertoire of twenty-three opera companies that had been in existence for at least fifty years. As might be expected, "top ten" operas made the highest proportion of works in any given season.

Repertoire alone is not seen as a determining factor in establishing a company's artistic identity. Opera production in the United States reflects a balance of the art form's musical, theatrical and visual elements. The international popular cultural industry—cinema, television, musical theater—has shaped the American consciousness, and is ever more pervasive thanks to the availability of many past performances online. American audiences' standards are reflective of an immersion in perfect CD recordings, riveting drama on screens of all sizes, and splashy multi-media events that tour from city to city. American opera producers strive to meet audience expectations through casting of artists who are musically and dramatically suited to their roles, rehearsal periods that are long enough to permit the artists to discover and communicate the drama of the work, and productions that engage sophisticated contemporary sensibilities.

While the lack of a dedicated venue leads to some predictable frustration when scheduling rehearsals and performances, it also liberates opera companies from maintenance costs affords some flexibility in artistic planning. An extreme example can be found in Long Beach Opera, which makes unconventional venues an important creative choice for each production: the company has performed Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus & Eurydice* in a swimming pool and Grigori Frid's *The Diary of Anne Frank* in a parking garage. For other companies, alternate (often smaller) venues provide an opportunity to experiment with an extended season, to test audience enthusiasm for new works, to showcase members of their young artist programs, or to introduce themselves to populations not likely to attend a performance at an opera house.

American operas are gaining a permanent place in the repertory; newer works like Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* and *Little Women* have had numerous performances across the states and around the world. While many works still lapse into obscurity in the years following their premiere, the recent re-emergence of John Adams's *Nixon in China* after a long dormancy shows that first reception is not final destiny. Co-commissions have

become more common; not only do such arrangements spread costs among several producers, they ensure that the new opera will be seen by audiences in more than one city. Often, schedule and budget are designed to allow for revisions following the work's first outing.

Repertory choice is an important part of a company's artistic profile, but there are other ways companies create and maintain an identity within their communities. Writing many years ago, director and translator Boris Goldovsky described two resident opera traditions, which he called the "international style" and the "opera theater style." Today, the divide is less pronounced: Even the most traditional houses place a value on both theatrical and musical aspects of production; star singers go to great lengths, even surgery, to avoid "fat lady" clichés; and, thanks to the advent of projected and seat-back translations, companies no longer have to choose between original language performance and audience comprehension.

One of the most important developments in the American opera industry has been the idea of coming together to create new productions. Given the relatively short seasons of most American opera companies, it can be difficult to justify the expense of creating new productions (which must then be maintained and stored). For much of the twentieth century, stock settings and painted drops were common. OPERA America, the national service organization for opera, traces its roots to an assembly of seventeen companies that came together to exchange, sell, rent or co-produce operas. This cooperation has resulted in a larger, more varied inventory of production materials available nationwide, one that is being constantly refreshed.

### **ARTISTS**

The emergence of American opera stars has strengthened the connection between the art form and the public. Until recently, opera companies' employment of European artists was considered a mark of distinction. While the outstanding performances of many of these artists helped build opera's popularity, they also reinforced the perception that opera was foreign.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States exported innumerable American singers to Europe. While the US could boast about a wealth of conservatories, the country did not yet have enough opera companies to help aspiring singers make the transition from student to professional. American singers had to go to Europe to gain experience, and many of them stayed there. The growth in the number of regional companies has given emerging artists a chance to perform new repertoire and to refine their performance skills. Even more significant in terms of professional development has been the emergence of apprentice programs across the country. Year-round and summer programs offer performance experience as well as advanced coaching in language, interpretation and stage movement. Today, virtually every important opera company has a program for emerging artists, and a commitment to engaging the most promising American singers.

In addition to appearing on the world's most celebrated opera stages, American artists are active ambassadors for opera and mentors for the next generation. Even the most established artists participate in community programs that introduce the art form to new audiences. Research has found that contact with artists is one of the most important factors in creating and maintaining deeper relationships between audiences and opera companies. In many cases, members of a company's young artist program are featured at special events, and patrons enjoy following the careers of these emerging professionals as they "graduate" and go on to sing around the country.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

When the Metropolitan Opera began radio broadcasts of performances in 1931, it made opera accessible to audiences in a whole new way. The great voices of the twentieth century could be heard—for free—in homes across the country, singing the core opera repertoire. Many of today's opera stakeholders—artist, administrators, and patrons—had their first introduction to opera when they stumbled upon a radio broadcast.

Today, technology continues to be an important means of distributing product. The Met continues its Saturday radio broadcasts, and many regional companies are able to broadcast their own performances on a local public radio station. Often, these programs feature conversations with company staff members and guest artists, further strengthening listeners' connection with the company.

In December 2006, the Met launched a new initiative, broadcasting performances live in high definition to movie theaters across the country and, eventually, around the world. While not quite as accessible as radio, these transmissions give audiences both sound and spectacle at a modest cost. A study conducted by Shugoll Research in 2008 revealed that a small number of viewers were first-time or infrequent operagoers; the broadcasts were more likely to be attended by members of the existing opera community. In many cases, regional company representatives make a point of attending the broadcasts to further strengthen their connection to local opera stakeholders.

Small-screen technology offers another way for opera companies to extend their relationships with members of their community. Electronic newsletters have become a staple communication vehicle, offering everything from behind-the-scenes articles and videos to updates on performance-night street closings. The majority of American opera companies also take advantage of social networking sites, particularly Facebook, and many have posted video excerpts of performances on YouTube.

While mainstage performances still constitute a company's primary "content," new technology has made it possible to create a secondary line of programming. Radio and cinema transmissions offer interviews with cast and crew during intermission; blogs detailing rehearsals appear on company Web sites; and time-lapse videos on YouTube show sets being constructed.

New technology is also transforming business practices. Shared databases and electronic communications offer potential for cost savings, broader reach, and more. Opera companies are responding to the increasingly crowded cultural marketplace with ambitious new programs, and are working hard to take advantage of new technology. Company leaders are beginning to recognize the need to step back and reconsider organizational structure and functions.

### **THE BUSINESS MODEL**

Opera managers in the United States have a unique challenge; they have to balance artistic creativity with financial management, focusing especially on the generation of income. This is very different from the situation in Europe where, with significant government funding, general directors are able to devote considerably more time to purely artistic affairs and much less time to marketing, fundraising and general administration.

Opera management in the United States grows from a unique funding structure that places the major responsibility for supporting opera companies on the private sector. In the United States, on average, opera companies earn forty percent of their revenue from the sale of subscriptions and single tickets. Another ten percent is earned from a variety of sources: advertisements in performance programs, sale of merchandise at gift shops, and earnings from endowments, among others. The remaining fifty percent of operating revenue comes from contributions from public and private sources. Public funding is only a small share of overall income; for most opera companies, it represents between five and ten percent of overall income. Sponsorships from corporations account for another five to ten percent of income and grants from foundations for yet another five to ten percent. Contributions from individual donors account for approximately twenty-five percent of overall income.

The dependence on ticket income and support from individual contributions—along with the brevity of most seasons—forces opera companies to achieve a higher level of excellence with every production and every performance. In Europe, if a patron does not return after a bad experience, the impact on the organization—from a financial perspective—is minimal.

Rudolf Bing, who was general manager of the Metropolitan Opera from 1950 to 1972, said that for every artistic decision there is a financial implication and for every financial decision there is an artistic implication. At times of stress, opera managers really prove their skill. Opera management is not nearly as difficult in times of economic prosperity as it is during times of reduced contributions and lower ticket sales. These situations create tough choices that place artistic achievement and financial stability in a delicate balance.

If companies are to fulfill their covenant with audience members, however, the first consideration must be maintaining artistic quality. A live, high quality music theater

experience is at the core of distinguishing opera from other entertainment options. If an opera is less engaging than a movie, a touring musical, a jazz concert, or an evening online, then opera companies will neither keep current audiences nor attract new subscribers and donors.

At the same time, opera companies in the United States have a unique level of flexibility to adjust to external factors. They have an economic advantage in their ability to make artistic choices that reduce costs. A symphony orchestra has a fifty-two-week contract with one hundred musicians; the same is true at a ballet company with a fixed corps of dancers. (Only the Metropolitan Opera has a year-round orchestra and chorus.) Solo opera artists, for example, are paid only for the actual performances they offer. Opera companies can choose operas with a large chorus, small chorus, or no chorus at all. As one consultant observed, opera companies have been doing for decades what major corporations discovered more recently—outsourcing. Opera companies have a level of flexibility that enables management to adjust, at least somewhat, to external conditions by hiring the people they need when they need them.

In light of the recent economic downturn, some companies have had to reduce the number of productions and performances. Others have rented or revived productions rather than create new ones. But while some companies are offering conservative seasons, others, recognizing the need to inspire audiences, are replacing *Carmen* with *Così* in order to retain a production of *Nixon in China*.

A strong board of directors with a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities is key to a successful opera company. Members of the board have a unique portfolio of duties, including governance, community relations, fundraising and advocacy.

Members of the board are entrusted by their community to guarantee that the mission of the organization they serve comes before all other concerns; that contributions are used to serve that mission, and that the resources, both human and financial, needed by the company to achieve its mission are secure. Members of the board are also trusted to make certain that the programmatic goals of the company are balanced with the ability of the community to support them. As a not-for-profit organization, an opera company has a responsibility to serve its community. Trustees represent the community, and should make certain that broader community interests—cultural, educational, economic—are appropriately addressed by opera company programs.

Opera companies rely on individual contributions for a large portion of their annual income. The fundraising function is an extension of the sales function, and as with ticket sales, the successful company increases sales by creating a culture of relationship. In the case of donors, their connection with the company is strengthened through a number of special benefits. These might include enhanced information about performances and artists; a dedicated box-office that allows exclusive access to preferred seats and the ability to make last-minute purchases; access to rehearsals and backstage areas; and access to the variety of personnel involved in producing opera, from artists to administrative and production personnel. Beyond the catalogue of benefits, American

opera companies can have whole departments responsible for maintaining relationships with donors. As with every area of company operations, the character of donor events represents the character of the company. Lyric Opera of Chicago marked its fiftieth anniversary with a procession of great international singers performing arias from their most celebrated roles; Houston Grand Opera presented a multi-genre experience celebrating the company's contribution to the American operatic art form.

Despite the challenges facing the opera field, opera stakeholders—professional staff, artists and patrons—are highly passionate and optimistic about the future of the art form. Companies continue to invest in new facilities, from large performance halls (The Dallas Opera, Florida Grand Opera) to “opera centers” that provide a combination of administrative, rehearsal and alternate performance space (Opera Memphis, Nashville Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Indianapolis Opera). And as the original multi-media art form, opera may be among the best-positioned of the classical performing arts to create relationships with new audiences.

Marc A. Scorca and Kelley Rourke

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<sup>i</sup> Scott, Eleanor. *The First Twenty Years of the Santa Fe Opera*. The Sunstone Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1976. 8.

<sup>ii</sup> Scott, 9.

<sup>iii</sup> Scott, 11.

<sup>iv</sup> Scott, 65.

<sup>v</sup> Scott, 15.

<sup>vi</sup> Scott, 10.

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